



# The Florida House of Representatives

**Chris Sprowls**  
**Speaker**

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Florida House Speaker Chris Sprowls' Inaugural Address; Remarks as Prepared for Delivery**

**TALLAHASSEE, Fla.** *(November 17, 2020)* — In his first address to the chamber as Florida House Speaker, Representative Chris Sprowls celebrated the convening of the 90<sup>th</sup> term of the Florida House of Representatives.

Here is the full text of Florida House Speaker Chris Sprowls' speech at his inaugural address to the Florida Legislature at Organization Session, as prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Members, for this privilege to serve. Thank you, Representative Burton and Representative Renner, for your kind remarks. Thank you, Representative Altman, for getting us started.

I regret that circumstances have muted our celebration today. Our Floor should be packed with former colleagues and old friends and the galleries filled to the rafters with our families and supporters. Each one of us is here because of the hard work and sacrifice of so many people.

Members, I'd like you to stand up and give a big round of applause for those guests who traveled to Tallahassee, for everyone watching on the Florida Channel, and for all those who are here with us in spirit.

To our guests from the other branches:

Justice Polston, thank you for representing the Supreme Court of Florida and for administering the oath of office to our Members. To our Governor and First Lady, Lt. Governor, Attorney General, Chief Financial Officer, Agriculture Commissioner, thank you for joining us today to celebrate the convening of the 90th term of the Florida House of Representatives since statehood.

Governor DeSantis, please know that the Members of the Florida House stand ready to work with you over the next two years to keep Florida on its path to prosperity.

I know that we are all looking forward to working with our partners in the Florida Senate, but I feel especially privileged to occupy this office while Wilton Simpson presides over the Senate. President Simpson, you are a man of character, compassion, and courage, and I look forward to standing shoulder to shoulder with you in the weeks and months to come.

Representative DuBose, you have always conducted yourself in this process with integrity, passion, and candor. Your respect and care for the institution of the Florida House is only surpassed by the respect and care you have for the Members whom you will lead.

A captain is only as good as his crew, and in the House's Leadership Team, I have the very best – Representatives Avila, Grant, Trumbull, Renner, Burton, Ingoglia, Latvala, Massullo, Perez, Leek, Grall, and Payne. Thank you for everything you do to make this state, this House, and me better.

To my fellow classmates elected in 2014 – it has been a long, sometimes rough, sometimes thrilling, but always interesting journey. I am glad we are all here – together – for this, our last chapter in the Florida House.

To the freshman Members who are at the start of your first chapter, welcome. The House is many things, but mostly, it is an institution that rewards the work you put into it. Embrace every opportunity, learn as much as you can, and try to spend time listening to people who see the world differently than you do.

For the sophomores and juniors, I'm going to ask you to turn off your legislative autopilots, discard your old assumptions, and look at this process with fresh eyes.

Over the last two weeks, we have rolled out a series of reforms to make sure the House continues to evolve and adapt.

Ultimately, though, your experience will be governed by your choices, and while I certainly cannot stop anyone from having a tantrum on Twitter, please know that there will be no place for that kind of Washington, D.C.-style conduct inside this Chamber or in this House. We can disagree and still treat one another with goodwill, patience, and mutual respect.

The ties that bind us are always greater than the things that divide us.

I learned that lesson from my family. Growing up, we had no shortage of lively debates around the dinner table, and I am reminded of that lesson every time my wife, Shannon, explains to me why I'm wrong about something – which, if I'm being honest, is probably a daily occurrence.

I have been so incredibly blessed by God to have a family that has surrounded me with their love and support, but who have also been so generous in sharing their triumphs and tragedies. We are, after all, not simply the sum of our own experiences, but the product of our family's journey.

And that's what I want to talk to you about today. I want to talk about families. I want to talk to you about fathers and sons, about mothers and daughters, about the families we are born into, the families we find, and the families we make. The concept of family predates law or civilization or culture. It represents the fundamental human connection that defines how we see the world and our place in it.

As anyone who has spent more than 15 minutes talking to me knows, I am the son of a retired New York City Police officer. For my dad, Joe, "protect and serve" wasn't a slogan or a motto. He put himself at risk every time he stepped out onto the streets. There were days that, if circumstances had gone just a little differently, I would never have been born. He watched as colleagues – friends – lost their lives while trying to save the lives of others. There are many reasons I chose to be a prosecutor, but at the forefront was my admiration for dad's service.

To step into the breach, to sacrifice for the greater good, is the noblest of callings. Our law enforcement officers – and our military – face very real risks that those of us who work behind desks cannot begin to fathom. These men and women deserve our understanding, they deserve our gratitude, and they deserve our respect.

Now, my dad also taught me another valuable lesson: I could always be better – be a better student, a better athlete, a better son, a better person. There is no profession, occupation, or endeavor where we can't improve.

For any Members who want to have an honest, thoughtful, fact-based conversation about how we can improve policing in Florida, my door and my mind are open. I do not dismiss, nor do I minimize, the complicated issues and historical entanglements surrounding police and race in the United States.

I recognize that my own experience has its limitations and that emotions can run high. But passion isn't the measure of good policy, and when dialogue descends into a diatribe, when it leads to the vilification of an entire profession, when it becomes a justification for violence and lawlessness, then we have abandoned reason for rage. And that's where we all should draw the line.

We cannot blame all of law enforcement for the sins of a few, we must not take actions that put the lives of Floridians at risk, and we should not allow any government in Florida to defund the police.

Recognizing the impact my father had on who I have become has made me incredibly aware of what I say and do with my own children. The birth of my sons changed my life in ways I could scarcely have imagined.

Prescott and Conrad have made me a better person, less self-involved, more patient. They have also changed my perspective about time. When I take my kids out to the sand dunes in the Gulf of Mexico and see their excitement and joy, I know that this is a feeling I never want to end, that this is something I want my boys to experience with their children.

I never want my kids to grow up, and yet I can't wait – so I can take my grandkids on their first boat ride. Fatherhood has made me understand that I need to be every bit as invested in tomorrow as I am in today. Because as tempting as it is to just think about next month's jobs numbers or this year's budget shortfall, if we do that while ignoring the emerging threats and latent dangers facing our state, we will fail my children, and we will fail yours.

I am reminded of the Latin phrase *semper paratus*, which means "always ready." It's the motto of the United States Coast Guard, and it should be our guiding emergency management principle. In Florida, we understand all too well the devastation caused by hurricanes, the still-fresh wounds inflicted by Michael and Irma, and the memory of Andrew that continues to haunt South Florida.

Homeowners have spent 15 years dealing with all the ways the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 changed Florida's insurance markets. Yet somehow, we always seem to be responding or reacting to storms. We need to shift our perspective, move beyond our current State Hazard Mitigation Strategy, and develop a strategic plan that ensures that we are prepared for all foreseeable contingencies.

Of course, not every crisis can be anticipated. On January 1st, none of us accurately predicted the events of 2020. Covid-19 came roaring into our lives, and nothing has ever been quite the same. We are still trying to fully understand and account for all the ways the virus has impacted – and continues to impact – families, businesses, schools, churches, and communities. I expect much of this Session will be spent dealing with the fallout of the virus and modernizing our laws and plans to ensure we are prepared for future pandemics.

But Covid-19 remains the exception, not the rule. Most of the dangers we face are not stealth viruses. In Florida, we are surrounded on three sides by water, and, like it or not – and you can waste as much time as you want arguing over the "why" – that water is flowing into places it shouldn't – flooding streets, damaging homes, and ruining businesses. We need to stop treating our environmental budget like a giant pork barrel buffet. We need to bring the same long-range planning and strategic discipline to our environmental programs that we bring to our transportation work plan. We need to stop fixating on land purchases as the sole measure of conservation and embrace the spectrum of priorities from beach re-nourishment to septic tank conversion to flood mitigation.

In Florida, the quality of our water is inextricably linked to the quality of our life. Quality of life is not a concept that we spend a lot of time on in government – we don't really measure it; EDR doesn't issue a report; we don't have an estimating conference; there isn't a state agency that regulates it – but it is an idea that is at the core of every family and every community.

My mom, Marie, always tried to instill in me the notion that life is about more than just academic or professional success. It's about friendships and relationships. It's about being part of civic organizations and being active in the church. It's about helping your neighbors – those you know and those you haven't met. My mother showed me that government isn't and shouldn't be at the center of people's lives. Government can remove barriers and provide guardrails, but it cannot fill those spaces created by families, neighbors, communities, and churches. We cannot legislate quality of life. We cannot appropriate prosperity or regulate happiness.

But we also can't be afraid to talk openly about the crises facing our families. Recently, I have been looking at the data on the disparities that black women face in maternal health care. Poor prenatal care can result in poor health outcomes for infants, which can, in turn, impact their development. Every baby should have the opportunity to be born healthy.

In my designation speech, I talked about the crisis facing boys – that our sons are falling behind in school and dropping out of the workforce, and about how boys aged 15-19 are three times more likely to commit suicide than girls. There is no doubt a connection between the crisis in boys and the well-documented problem of fatherlessness. We cannot ignore our children in crisis, nor can we allow them to fall through the cracks in the system. I wish I could pass a law that guaranteed that every child in Florida had what I was lucky enough to have – a mother who always put the welfare of her kids first. I can't fix that problem with a law, but we can do something to fix the child welfare system, to raise the quality of case workers, to encourage adoption, and to create support systems for older kids in foster care.

Still, kids are resilient, and they can overcome adversity and transform their lives. One of my grandfathers was abandoned by his parents in an orphanage. He overcame his circumstances, went to war in the South Pacific, and became a successful businessman. My other grandfather immigrated to this country from Portugal. He had no formal education but taught himself to read and write seven languages. He found in words and books the tools he needed to change his life. Literacy expands our vision of what is possible. It allows us to walk in the shoes of others and to learn more about ourselves. Books are doorways to new ideas and new adventures.

Florida has been a national leader in reading, and former Governor Jeb Bush deserves the lion's share of the credit for insisting that every child can learn to read, for implementing new strategies, and demanding accountability. We've outperformed the rest of the country on closing the achievement gap in reading. But it's just not enough.

If we don't take aggressive new steps and just continue with current trends, it will be 230 years before every Florida student is reading on grade level. Maybe our state government can't send a person to the Moon, but we can try to make sure that every child in Florida can read and understand a book about the Moon by the year 2030.

That's why I am asking all of you to join me in launching our New Worlds Initiative, where the State of Florida will partner with private donors to put books in the homes of every struggling reader or low-income child from grades kindergarten through five. Our goal would be to have a book delivered to each child's home every month, to get them excited about reading and help them build a home library that will not only benefit them but their siblings and friends. If a child can read, they can learn. If they can learn, then everything becomes possible.

Families, though, are the key. To engage and empower parents, we will partner with local libraries and schools to have Book Bootcamps, where parents can come to learn how to teach their children to read. We know from our experience with school choice that when we engage parents in their child's education, we see dramatic improvements, especially among low-income and minority communities. Our families are our first teachers, and as policymakers, we should be wracking our brains on how to give parents every tool possible – whether it's a book or an education savings account – to help their child find a better future.

Literacy and education are only a part of life's supply chain. A better future requires access to better training. Better training requires better jobs. Better jobs require new ideas and new innovators. Government doesn't create jobs, but we can pursue policies that help those ready, willing, and able to help themselves. Education is the fuel, but work is the engine that drives our society. Work lifts people up and gives them dignity and purpose. Unfortunately, I think we as a society have forgotten the value of work. Fame has eclipsed achievement as cultural currency, and we have become so focused on college as a pathway to success that we have created a system that marginalizes opportunities for many Floridians.

We need an Opportunity Agenda in the Florida House, an agenda that zeroes in on working and middle-class families. We have spent hundreds of millions of dollars over the years on a fragmented workforce system that only measures its inputs. We can do better. We need to be the first state in the country to insist that workforce programs meet actual outcome standards. We need to create an Opportunity Hub integrating all of our workforce programs into one unified system.

Florida's path to prosperity lies in encouraging new entrepreneurs and new businesses. When we talk about entrepreneurship in Florida, it can come across as if every new business should be a tech start-up or a Fortune 500 company. But the lifeblood of Florida's economy lies in neither extreme. It rests with the small business owners like my in-laws, David and Beverly Long, who opened their gas station and mechanic shop 30 years ago. My father-in-law doesn't see himself as a captain of industry; he gets up every day, goes to work, serves his customers, and tries to do right by his employees. Self-employment leads to self-determination and self-actualization.

My challenge to this House is to develop an Entrepreneurship Agenda that knocks down the barriers holding back all those untapped job creators. Here are a few suggestions to get us started:

- Let's create a delay discount on government fees. If a state or local agency fails to promptly issue a license or permit, the fee associated with it is reduced or waived.



- Let's inject energy into Florida's rural communities by promoting them as destinations for remote work and consider repurposing existing funding to build out the broadband infrastructure in rural Florida.
- Let's continue to remove occupational licenses that have nothing to do with protecting the public and everything to do with creating barriers to competition.
- Let's support home-based businesses by passing laws that will make Florida the national leader in promoting cottage industries.

In Florida, we should be in the business of new business.

We have had a good deal of discussion in recent years regarding the role of higher education in Florida's economic life. Our taxpayer-funded colleges and universities should not be job training centers, but they also cannot divorce themselves from the economic needs of our state. And while our public universities should offer a full range of degree options, it does not follow that the state should subsidize all degrees to the same degree. We should consider changing the funding incentives to reward universities for enrolling students in programs that are either tied to high-demand occupations or that require an exceptional degree of intellectual rigor. In addition, we could offer a Hi-Lo Scholarship, which would provide a 50% discount on tuition for students who enroll in a major course linked to a high-demand job.

But if universities aren't just about jobs, neither should they be resorts with an occasional class. Virtual education expands access to non-traditional college students and students whose family obligations make it difficult to enroll at a major research university. We could offer those students a Free Seat Scholarship that would provide a 50% discount on tuition if they opt for a virtual class in lieu of an in-person class.

Floridians are made as much as we are born, and higher education can be an effective way to lure talented young people to our state. Let's consider tapping into one of our greatest resources – our senior population – and create a scholarship. To our grandparents, if you have a grandchild who is a top-performing student in another state, they could qualify for in-state tuition at a Florida university.

Our higher education system will, of course, be central to our budget conversations this Session. It is no secret that Florida's economy stumbled as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and we may be facing a revenue shortfall in putting together next year's State budget. But where other people see crisis, I see opportunity.

We need to stop congratulating ourselves on how much we spend on a problem and start asking what we are getting for the money we spend. We thought we were spending millions of dollars to help women and children in the fight against domestic violence. It turned out we were really helping Tiffany Carr buy houses in North Carolina where she could hide out from our process servers.

The scandal surrounding the Coalition Against Domestic Violence has laid bare one of the failures in Florida's system of government. In the 1970s and 80s, when the Democrats ran

Florida, we created boards, commissions, councils, and regional entities. The grand Democratic theory was rooted in the Church of the Technocrat. If we could only create "independent" bodies filled with "experts," we will get good governance. What we got were entities unable to adapt, unwilling to innovate, and incapable of doing much more than perpetuating their own existence.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Republicans took over, and we worshiped at the Altar of the Private Sector. We created quasi-private entities under the theory that they would bring the energy and innovation of the market into government. Instead, we got entities that acted like private sector companies when it came to pay and perks and like government agencies when it came to innovation and funding.

Under both approaches, we have a vast, mostly uncharted, and mostly unaccountable network of public and quasi-private entities with the authority to tax and/or spend and/or regulate private behavior. If Washington, D.C., has a "deep state," in Florida we've created the "Subterranean State."

It's time we brought these entities to the surface. For the ones that can demonstrate actual positive outcomes, we need to ensure there are adequate fiscal controls and accountability measures. And for those that are doing little other than adding administrative costs to already under-performing programs, they need to be dissolved and their functions reassigned to an accountable entity.

I acknowledge that discussions about accountability make some people uncomfortable. But we can't be afraid to be honest when something isn't working. Silence strangles the truth. We can't avoid talking about the things that matter because the conversation might be controversial. I said that earlier when talking about the crises in families. The same thing also applies to patriotism.

The very word patriotism does seem to cause some in the media and all of Woke Twitter to swarm like locusts. In their funhouse mirror universe, they see even the most innocuous expression of patriotism as something dark and sinister. They equate patriotism with white nationalism. But patriotism is a rejection of white nationalism and any other doctrine that seeks to divide Americans. Patriotism is an expression of love of one's country. Teaching our children to appreciate and love the United States of America should be a fundamental and indispensable part of our curriculum in elementary and secondary schools.

When I say that patriotism is about love, I don't use that word lightly. I would never use that word lightly. Everything I know about love I learned from my wife, Shannon. She taught me that love isn't shallow. It isn't something from a fairy tale or a pop song. It is seeing somebody for who they really are, flaws and all, and still loving that person. Real love recognizes that no one is perfect and that we are not simply the sum of our worst moments. We forgive those we love because we can separate the core of a person from the mistakes they have made. That kind of love – when applied to our country, that's patriotism.



The United States is the only nation in the world animated by the power of an idea – that every individual is entitled to liberty and freedom. Throughout our history, we have struggled – sometimes painfully but always under our own volition – to live up to that ideal.

Patriotism isn't marching in a parade or waiving a flag. It is embracing your part in this grand experiment in liberty. We shouldn't be afraid to share that ideal – to talk about the "shining city on a hill" with our kids in elementary school, just as we shouldn't back away from discussions with older students about those times in our history where we have fallen horribly short. We must have those conversations because if we don't, if we don't foster a common faith in our nation, then we will not be able to maintain a civil society.

I would love for every school-age child to be able to hear from Floridians – Americans – who hail from countries in Latin America or other parts of the world where freedom is a luxury and liberty a dream. Let them tell our school children why – of all the nations in the world – they chose the United States as their home. Let them say loudly and with pride in their voice – todos somos Americanos; we are all Americans.

I know not everyone will feel that way. Most of us have had the experience of being in a relationship with someone who is perpetually critical, who always assumes the worst about us, who withholds any affection unless we are willing to change every single thing about ourselves to conform to their idea of what we should be. In relationships, we recognize that behavior as dysfunctional and toxic. We don't call it love. And when applied to our country, we shouldn't pretend it is patriotism.

This denigration of the idea of patriotism is part of a larger movement that disputes the basic tenets of American life. It's a movement that believes our Founding Fathers should be rejected and their monuments torn down. It's a movement that believes capitalism – an economic system that has lifted more people out of poverty than any other economic system in human history – should be abolished. It's a movement that believes free speech should only be permitted to the extent that speech conforms to what they deem to be acceptable. And they believe religions should be punished for maintaining tenets of faith that are inconsistent with the movement's own beliefs. Fundamentally, this movement rejects the idea that rests at the very heart of our society: pluralism – the notion that we can all live in this country together, that we are all part of this greater American family even if we don't agree on every issue, even if we have different religions or beliefs or values.

What is interesting about these movements is that they are rarely expressions of popular will but rather abuses perpetuated by the elite and the powerful. In the era of McCarthyism, it was a gross misuse of political power. Today, it is cultural and technological power. Instead of the Red Scare, today we have Cancel Culture and its roving band of "Twitter Robespierres" who scour social media looking to ruin the careers and livelihoods of people who said something stupid or insensitive or, worse, just something that doesn't fit inside this movement's narrow orthodoxy. In their inquisition, they are aided and abetted by weak university administrators and cowardly corporate executives who lack the moral courage to push back against a mob or distinguish right from wrong.

Now I want to be clear – as I said earlier, this is a movement that has been given an outsized voice by the media and probably only constitutes a small fraction of the population. I don't believe intolerance or cancel culture represent the values of mainstream Floridians – Democrats, Republicans, or independents. I do believe that this is still a state where we value free speech, where we recognize good people of good intent can disagree on matters of politics or faith without resorting to personal attacks.

We need to look at the practice of doxing – publishing an individual's private information online for the purpose of subjecting them to harassment or the risk of physical harm – and figure out how to adapt our criminal laws to shut down that behavior. If we cannot control the Twitter mob, then we can at least ensure that no Floridian is placed at risk of violence from an actual mob.

We need to remind our public institutions of higher learning that exposing students to new ideas is not an inconvenience; it is actually part of their core mission. We need universities where students are participating in challenging debates and not hiding away in safe spaces. And if any public university denies tenure because a professor fails to pass an ideological litmus test, then the university should be subjected to liability with damages only payable from the university's private funds.

All of us want the same things for our families – to able to live the life we want to live, to find a good job, to send our kids to a good school, to live on a safe street, to drink clean water, and to be free to believe or worship however we choose. That is the quintessential American Dream. And because we want those things for ourselves, we should want them for our neighbors, our communities, and our state. That is our job as a State Legislature – to knock down every barrier and create every opportunity so that every family in Florida can find their own American Dream.

I know I have thrown a lot at you today. Please know it has all been offered not as a formal agenda but as an invitation. If you heard an issue, a problem, or a topic today that excites you, that you want to be a part of solving, please come see me. If you happen to have an idea that's better than something I suggested today, I can't wait to hear all about it. And if you absolutely hated something I said, that's great, too. I look forward to having that conversation and hearing your point of view.

We have a lot of work to do, and it's time to get started. Thank you, God Bless you, and God Bless the State of Florida.

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